

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 22, 2018

An Attractive Church

Acts 5:12-16

Prayers were being answered at the Jerusalem Christian Assembly. In the chapter right before today's Scripture reading, Luke tells us that the believers had been petitioning God to give them boldness in speaking the word. They had been asking God to stretch out his healing hand and perform signs and wonders. And now, in today's text, we see evidence that God was responsive to their prayers. The sick were being made whole. The demon-possessed were being liberated. People were responding to the preaching of the gospel.

In fact, one peek at the facts and figures in the Sunday bulletin confirmed that the Spirit was moving. Worship attendance was up. Offering totals were increasing. New ministries were being organized. More small groups were being formed. The weekly church calendar was busier than ever. The prayer list included a growing number of entries that began with, "Praise the Lord!" Things were getting to where Solomon's Colonnade wasn't big enough to accommodate all the worshipers. At this pace, the Jerusalem fellowship would soon need to start thinking about becoming a multisite church, or begin planting new congregations.

But for now, people keep coming to the church, even when the church isn't real intentional or active about coming to them. True, it won't be long until the church's movement outward will kick into a higher gear. As Luke's story of the community of believers unfolds, we'll see even more about how the Spirit propels the church into new territory where the word crosses boundaries and transcends divisions that ordinarily would have kept people from entering the people of God. As God keeps his promises to Israel, he heals both bodies and people groups, creating a family of faith that grows larger and larger. Signs of this expansion are already evident in Jerusalem. "More and more men and women believed in the Lord," says Luke, "and were added to their number" (v. 14).

Luke's description of the growth of the early church looks and feels like such a contrast to the struggles and decline of so many Christian congregations in our own day and time. Research steadily presents us with numbers and facts that point to the fading influence of the church on Americans. In particular, the category of people often referred to as the "Nones," those with no religious ties or affiliation, is on the rise. At the same time, the percentage of Americans who claim to be Christians has declined. Some folks look at the statistics and forecast the complete collapse of Christianity in the United States. But the data are actually more complex than that. According to one summary, "Fewer people claim to be Christians, but churchgoers—those who regularly attend services—are holding steady in some segments, and thriving in others."¹

So while the picture is mixed, the overall trend definitely reflects a decline in Christianity's influence on the lives of Americans. But as I stand here at the pulpit this morning, I look out and see anywhere from 50 to 70 people to whom the Christian faith matters. It matters enough to you, enough for you to be here with others in order to worship God this morning. You're part of the renewed and restored people of God, centered on faith in Christ, that first gathered in the temple courts in Jerusalem. Thanks to those who did become, as Jesus said, "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,"

including Bryans Road, you have heard and received the good news of Jesus Christ, confessing him as Lord.

He is Lord now just as much as he was Lord then. Just because you arrive at our house of worship and see more empty seats than you used to doesn't mean that Jesus is Lord any less. The good news is still just as good. It's still the power of God for salvation. The God whose power raised Jesus from the dead, and whose power works in us to revive us and to renew our devotion to the flourishing of our own fellowship called Grace Baptist Church.

That flourishing and growth includes not only your presence here, but your invitation to others, so that they may be present here as well. Our church has various ways of reaching out to connect with folks who aren't part of a Christian congregation. Our church's programs and events. Our church's community ministries. Our church's website. Our church's sign. Our church's day care center. All these, and others, are ways of opening the doors of our congregation so that others may come in. But again and again, we find that churchgoers bringing people to church with them is an indispensable key to the strength and growth of a congregation.

LifeWay Research recently reported on a survey in which they asked churchgoers how often they had invited an individual or family to attend a worship service with them at their church in the last six months. Seventeen percent said they had extended an invitation. Twenty-one percent extended two invitations. And 25 percent extended three or more invitations. Nine percent said they didn't know how many invitations they had extended. About 3 out of 10, 29 percent, said they hadn't invited anyone, which indicates, as the researchers concluded, that "For a number of churchgoers, inviting people to church isn't on their radar."²

Remember that the God we worship and serve, the God who came to us in Jesus to redeem and restore a people who will exhibit his saving power to the world, wants us to bring others into the life of his people. And one of the enduring ways of doing that is for you to invite others to come to church with you. True, there's more to evangelism than simply inviting people to church. Our aim isn't simply to invite people to church but most of all to invite them to Jesus. But as we see in today's Scripture passage, the life and ministry and power of Jesus is present in the community of his followers. The people who were coming to faith in the Lord and being added to the church in Jerusalem weren't showing up in the temple courts simply because folks in the congregation were friendly, or because they liked the music and enjoyed the preaching. They were coming primarily because there in that community of believers they experienced the saving presence of the Lord. And they wanted others to do as well. So much so that they brought others who needed to be healed. And because the Spirit was being poured out so abundantly, there was plenty of God's life-giving power to go around. In short, the gospel was attracting others. Lives were being changed.

The good news is that the life-giving Lord is present and working in congregations of all sizes. Big churches. Medium churches. Small churches. Even a church where there's only one person in attendance. So it was in one pastor's experience:

After his ordination in 1969, author and pastor Phillip Johnson received a call to serve one large church and ten smaller churches on the northern coast of Newfoundland, Canada. On the first day of his new circuit ministry, Johnson learned that in order to get to the smallest of the churches, he would have to travel 40 miles by snowmobile to a tiny village. When Johnson arrived, only one person had shown up for worship—a fisherman who had traveled about 20 miles to get there.

Johnson initially thought about just saying a prayer and calling it a day. But then he realized that together, he and the fisherman had already logged 60 miles of travel and had 60 more

miles to return home. With that in mind, Johnson decided to conduct the whole service as if there were a few hundred worshipers. They did it all: the hymns, the readings, the prayers, the sermon, the Lord's Supper, and the benediction.

It was during the sermon that Johnson wondered why he had bothered. The fisherman never looked up. But when Johnson greeted the fisherman at the door and thanked him for coming, Johnson received a pleasant surprise. The fisherman said, "Reverend, I've been thinking about becoming a Christian for about 30-odd years. And today's the day!"³

The effectiveness of the gospel isn't determined by the size of the congregation. The power of the word doesn't rise and fall with the weekly attendance figures. No matter whether it's unleashed in the temple courts in Jerusalem, in a tiny chapel on the coast of Canada, or in a small sanctuary in Bryans Road, Maryland, the good news of Jesus Christ can reach and redeem and restore those who come under its influence.

So see what you miss out on if you're not here. Now understandably, there are times when you can't be. Sickness, travel, job requirements, unexpected events, and other important obligations sometimes mean that you're not able to be in congregational worship every Sunday. But at the same time, remember that growing as a disciple, growing as a church, and bringing others to meet and experience the Lord, begins with your own personal, faithful presence in the gathering of God's people, week by week.

Imagine a more contemporary setting for Luke's description of the early church: "The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade, where security cameras had been installed to keep track of who might be skipping church." In our day and time, it's possible. About three years ago, the *Washington Post* included an article about the potential use of facial recognition software in churches. Basically, a congregation can upload a database of photos of its members, and then security cameras can be used to match the video with existing photos. That way the church can keep track of who's attending church, and who's not. Not surprisingly, reactions to the proposal have been mixed. Some see the benefits of it, especially in megachurches. But others are more cautious and skeptical. One researcher said, "I don't think that kind of facial recognition software would play well at all with members because it strikes as 'Big Brother.' . . . While God sees everything, we're not sure we want our pastor to be omniscient."⁴

In today's text, Luke doesn't need facial features and algorithms to capture the atmosphere of addition, the mood of multiplication, that prevailed in the community of believers in Jerusalem. Instead, Luke's choice of words and phrases conveys it well. "Many miraculous signs and wonders." "All the believers." "More and more men and women." "Crowds gathered." This morning's gathering may not be on the scale of what happened there in the temple courts. But the same Lord is present to heal, to redeem, and to save. The same Holy Spirit, poured out upon them, can descend to restore and renew among us. The same gospel, and the life-change that it brings, can be just as attractive to people now as it was then. So continue to do your part in making our congregation a place where people can come, worship, and leave saying, "The Lord is there, present and working, making people whole."

For now, pray. Pray for the Spirit, the one who gives life from above, to come and work among us. And as you pray for the Spirit's coming, pray also for your own going, that as you go, you will invite, and that as you invite, you will make the gospel attractive by your words and deeds.

¹ Ed Stetzer, "The State of the Church in America: When Numbers Point to a New Reality, Part 1." Christianity Today website. September 12, 2016. Accessed July 18, 2018 < <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/september/state-of-american-church-when-numbers-point-to-new-reality.html>>.

² Bob Smietana, "Poll: You're Probably Inviting Friends to Church." Christian Today website. July 13, 2018. Accessed July 19, 2018 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/july/inviting-friends-church-lifeway-research.html>>.

³ Lee A. Dean, Plainwell, Michigan <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/december/4122908.html>>.

⁴ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Skipping Church? Facial Recognition Software Could Be Tracking You." The Washington Post website. July 24, 2015. Accessed July 19, 2018 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/07/24/skipping-church-facial-recognition-software-could-be-tracking-you/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.2e46a9f7b42d>.